SHORT STORY NIGHT

FEATURED STORY:

ORPHANS by Brad Felver

Virtual Interview with the author!!!

Brad Felver is a fiction writer, essayist, and teacher of writing. His honors include two O. Henry Prizes, the Drue Heinz Literature Prize. His fiction and essays have appeared widely in magazines such as One Story, New England Review, Colorado Review, Story, Subtropics, and many others.

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21 AND OLDER.

ORPHANS

BRAD
FELVER

When Gus took on an apprentice, a kid eager as a chipmunk, he didn't expect it to last. The shop teacher at the high school had sent the occasional wayward teenager his way over the years, kids who seemed to hang on the precipice of this life or that life. Gus always did what he could, welcoming them out to the farm, walking them through the workshop, his approach to dovetail layout, how to keep the grain downhill while milling lumber. But it was months before he let them touch any tool except the palm sander. He always started them on sanding, and sanding always broke them. They probably thought it was some hazing ritual, but it wasn't that at all. It was a kindness. Sanding exposed temperaments: you either had the right sensibilities for this work or you didn't. Better to find out straightaway.

You could just see the impatience in these kids, visible as a tumor. No, the apprenticeships never lasted. A brief spike of companionship before Gus returned to the long quiet.

But the kid sanded without complaint. Seemed to relish the tedium of it, methodically moving up grits, had a knack for hitting the tightest corners without going cross-grain.

"But how do you know when you're done sanding, sir?" he'd asked his second week. Everything else had a clear end point, but sanding was different. You chose when to be done.

"Sand until this feels like a Siberian labor camp," Gus said. "That's your halfway point."

The shop teacher had warned Macon about the old man. Well, not so much warned as primed. The old man wasn't dangerous, nothing like that, but he was eccentric. A recluse. No one in town knew what to make of him, and mostly they didn't make anything. But rumors still spread like viruses. Sloppy in their cruelty. The hermetic old man on his farm on the edge of town. Rumors left to circulate eventually become true.

One story claimed that he'd been a Catholic priest but then was excommunicated, and another that he'd been a Green Beret in Vietnam. Terrible PTSD, unpredictable and dangerous outbursts. One boy said that the old man sat

in his barnyard at twilight, shooting bats with a twelve-gauge just to watch them tumble out of the sky. Rotting bats strewn across the barnyard.

All of these assumed, as rumors do, that the old man had secrets. But it only took about twenty minutes with him to see how wrong they all were. No outbursts or violent impulses. No bat carcasses. A kind, soft-spoken nature. And patience—the old man was like the God of patience, like he had some extra organ. Never rushed, never raised his voice. Never made mistakes, but also never seemed to mind when Macon made them. Plenty of extra lumber, he'd say, and plenty of time to set things right.

No, the rumors got the old man all wrong. Macon still didn't know exactly who the old man was, but he knew who he wasn't. He'd been most struck by how *ordinary* the old man was. Wasn't even eccentric. He was just quiet and sad.

That spring, Ruth retired from her teaching position at the community college. Her colleagues bought her an ice-cream cake and said good luck as if they would see her again on Monday. She thought it would feel like a new grace, so many free hours, time become expansive, generous. She would take long walks, long baths, would read long books. And she did all of those things. But she hadn't foreseen the loneliness. Not the loneliness of body, of missing another human presence, but the loneliness of obsolescence. The world was a great choir, she stood there nestled in its rows, but now she did not sing.

Harold Gutman, her partner of the past twenty years, still worked long hours and always would. Left before seven and walked down Charles Street to the hospital. She couldn't remember the last time he'd kissed her goodbye.

Her mind turned inward, of course. Tumbled backward into memory. Her life seemed to have changed directions. Somehow, it was memory that now lay before her.

Gus and Annabelle and backyard full of wet leaves. Annabelle running and jumping and skinning her knees. Ornery as a badger one minute, innocent and cherubic the next. Building dioramas and sledding before sunrise. Fending off requests for a puppy, and then a kitten, and then a gerbil. Sometimes Ruth even laughed. The absurdities of parenthood: single socks scattered around the house like shrapnel, grape juice crusted into Annabelle's nose hair, diapers full of colors that didn't exist anywhere else in nature. And each night, collapsing into bed with Gus, the feeling of exhaustion earned, as if they'd just donated blood.

Dear Gus. A marriage like defiance of destiny. It was worth any catastrophe, in its way. She'd never told him that and wished she could. They'd crashed into each other like asteroids. A wild intensity to that sort of love, an entire lifetime crammed into a dozen years. Life packed so densely it needed an atomic number. But then Annabelle died, and everything ruptured.

Then the Lost Years. A swift divorce. Two decades of silence, an impenetrable barricade, which they erected and defended together. Annabelle's ghost perpetually sat between them, staring, unblinking. They were like escaped convicts who were shackled together. She moved back to Boston, Gus back to the family farm. She settled in with Harold Gutman. It was companionship, not entirely without love. But Gus had the courage to remain alone. He would later admit that there were entire years when he hadn't spoken a word aloud.

And then they'd crashed into each other again. Life had eroded so much of them, and this had neutralized something. They could bear the weight of the past for short stretches. Now they talked on the phone every Sunday. Hearing his voice through the receiver left Ruth feeling like Moses hearing the voice of God.

They talked as people do, about taxes and bad drivers and cholesterol medication. But mostly, they talked about Annabelle, remembered stories aloud, conjuring her bodily, each reminding the other one of the memories. Each had to ensure that someone else was safeguarding them. Because if one of them died, and the other one wasn't clutching that memory, well, then it would just be gone.

The kid still called Gus *sir*, like Gus was some colonel. More than a year now of *yes sirs* and *no sirs*, and it drove Gus crazy. He'd told the kid to just call him Gus, but the kid couldn't manage it, not even now. It was the one direction he hadn't obeyed.

There was a sadness to the kid. Gus recognized it straightaway. He'd devoted the second half of his life to grief. Grieving people have everything in common, and they have nothing in common.

But now the kid was hardly a kid anymore, would be old enough to vote soon. Rounding into a fine woodworker, methodical as an orthopedist. Gus sometimes watched the kid as he set his featherboard or positioned his cauls for a glue-up, and the kid's breathing changed. Got quicker but softer. His concentration was absolute. Like watching an artist work, one who was just a little bit crazy. Van Gogh or Pollock. Ten thousand board-feet run through the table saw, and the work still thrilled the kid, all of it. Still thrilled Gus, too, though his body hurt all the time now. His lungs sagged from sixty years of sawdust. He saw the finish line, and maybe that's what he'd had in mind when he took the kid on.

"All we do," the old man said, "is *remove* wood. You can't add, only remove, and once it's gone, you can't put it back."

He spoke of woodworking as the art of shadow-making. Shadow lines as design features on desks and tables; shadow angles to consider from lamps on desks; inlays on tabletops designed to mimic the shadows. They made sawdust, which was just the shadow of wood.

The old man had strong opinions, like all of the lonely artists. Art required loneliness. But he tried to hold his views close and seemed regretful when he divulged them. Apologized for slipping into sermon. He didn't want to be that sort of man. He even asked what Macon thought. Did he have it all wrong? Shadow-making? He'd been doing this work all his life, and that could be its own sort of burden.

He preferred fixed tenons to loose. Preferred dovetails cut by hand, no jigs, no machines. Preferred his old German marking gauges to mechanical pencils. He designed tables and desks to sit on three legs, not four. A fourth leg was like a malignant growth. It was like saying an obvious thing at a party. His hands were gnarled and bent like an old boxer's. Knuckles with open gashes, though he never seemed to notice.

But wouldn't jigs be easier? Macon asked. And what about those loose tenon joiners he'd seen? Wouldn't that speed things up?

"Do you not like the work anymore?"

Macon said of course he did. He liked it more than anything.

The old man just nodded, said nothing else, but Macon could see the silhouette of what he hadn't said. *If you like the work, why invent ways to rush through it?*

The furniture they built existed as a sculpture of the old man's mind. He was brilliant, there was no ignoring that, but he was so quiet about it. Maybe even ashamed. Brilliant the way an oak tree is brilliant.

Each day the kid walked out to the farm from town, almost two miles, and the last fifty yards or so, he sometimes ran. Sprinted across the barnyard. Gus had seen him do it, the kid running to the workshop, like a lost child running to his mother.

The first month of his apprenticeship, the kid had shown up at three thirty, directly after school, and hadn't left until after supper time. It didn't take long for Gus to leave him alone in the workshop, and not much longer until he pointed out that the door didn't lock. Didn't even latch, actually. The doorknob had broken years earlier, pulled clean off, and he just leaned a length of bur oak against it. A farmer's deadbolt.

Sometimes the kid forgot to reset the farmer's deadbolt, and the workshop door would catch in the wind, flap back and forth like a sail. If the sun was just right, it would throw shadows across the barnyard. Long, lean shadows, shadows sharp as blades, arcing in wide parabolas. The first time Gus saw them, it pulled him up short. Shadows that seemed to remake the barnyard physically. He stared as a little boy seeing fireworks for the first time.

Gus offered to drive the kid home each evening, but the kid always declined, said No sir, it was fine, he liked the walk. And if it was OK, maybe he'd stay a little later some nights? Until nine or even ten?

Gus wanted to tell the kid to pace himself. This kind of work accumulated. He'd feel old long before he actually was. But he worried this would sound like an admonishment. Mentors were a lot like dictators. You had to be judicious with that sort of power. Everything you said, or didn't say, would stick.

The kid was an orphan in a town that didn't have orphans. Had no room for them, as no town has room for them. Their only charge is to remain unseen. They are too sad to look at. They look different than other children, can be spotted like weeds in the grass, though no one can say what is so different. People could tell that Gus wasn't the kid's father. Knew instinctively that something was missing from him.

Could you still say that? Orphan? Gus wasn't sure, and he wanted to get it right, but how did you figure it out? When nomenclature changed, it seemed like you were supposed to just *know*, and if you didn't, it was probably evidence of some deeply imbedded prejudice, and maybe it was. Maybe it really was. He'd never wondered until now, and that had to mean something.

No, Gus hadn't given much thought to the kid's parents, but then then the shop teacher called and asked after the kid. This was maybe two months into the apprenticeship. Had Gus seen the kid lately? Apparently he'd dropped out of school and was staying in the basement of the Presbyterian church, which was the town's unofficial homeless shelter.

"What about his folks?"

The shop teacher drew in a breath that felt like a rebuke. "He's an orphan, is all I know."

When Gus brought it up, the church basement, the kid got sheepish as a bird dog. Apologized again and again, seemed afraid that Gus might send him packing.

"I'm just trying to understand," Gus said.

"I can't go back to one of those homes," the kid said. He looked down at his boots. Gus could feel him coiling up, like a snake that was afraid it might need to strike. He wanted to reassure the kid, tell him that he'd never send him packing. Not ever. He felt bonded to the kid, and he wasn't the sort of man who felt bonded to other people.

"So, your parents...?"

The kid shook his head. He wouldn't say any more about his parents, not right now. There was some terrible story lurking, and it would come out at some point. The kid was awfully young to be so full of scar tissue.

Then the kid started talking, almost like a way to evade questions about his parents, and once he'd started, he couldn't stop. Spoke more words in three minutes than he had in two months. "It's just all I want to do," he said. "Working with wood. Shadow-making. It's just—is this how people feel when they go skydiving? So many

little things, like the way you chamfer the edges of your stop blocks or running the bench plane's iron over the diamond plate, the way the sound changes. You can actually *hear* when it's sharp. And the smell. Bur oak all smells like bur oak, that moldy vanilla sort of smell, but every board smells different from the others. Probably because it used to be alive, which you just forget sometimes."

Truth was, Gus admired the kid, even more now. Maybe that was misguided, but he did. In some ways, the kid was stunted. The world had refused him entry. Had no room for him. In other ways, he was an old soul. Already wise, but he didn't know it. Wise people never thought of themselves as wise. God—he was going to be such a remarkable man. Already he knew that no one could understand the intricacies of your heart, not really, and mostly no one cared. And yet he politely declined to be beaten down by any of this. Met the cruelty with industriousness. It was a quiet, daily sort of courage that no one would ever notice. The world offered no one dignity, but the kid would make his own.

Gus remembered youth, barely. He'd spent the first half of his life exploring the world and the second half retreating from what he'd discovered. But the kid was still an explorer. Gus himself felt incapable of that sort of hopefulness now. He felt old, and his body felt heavy, little more than a repository for so much grief accumulated along the way, which was just what happened to people who managed to live long enough.

"Sometimes," the kid said, "It feels like we're giving those trees a whole second life."

Gus nodded but said nothing. He just wanted to keep listening to the kid.

"The way you make furniture, the way you're teaching me, it'll last forever, just absolutely forever, so we're almost making the trees immortal."

"Right," Gus said.

"Just thinking about the workshop makes me homesick," the kid said. "Ever love something like that?"

Gus wanted to hug the kid. He hadn't hugged another person in years, not since his own daughter. Thirty years earlier, when she was a toddler. And then she'd died, and Gus had lived an impenetrable silence ever since. Until this remarkable kid showed up like God's own apology.

The old man set Macon up in the back bedroom, the one with low dormers. It was like a time capsule. A *Crosby, Sills & Nash* poster on the wall and an old baseball glove with cracked leather hanging from a nail.

Get some new posters if you want, the old man said. Move the furniture around, leave it messy. It was Macon's room now, he said, and he'd never enter uninvited. Did he like bacon or sausage better for breakfast?

Macon lay in bed that first night and listened to the old house groan under a driving westerly wind. He closed his eyes and felt like he was on a ship's prow. The wind beating against the house, the walls trembling. It should have made him feel exposed, but didn't. The house had endured that wind for two-hundred years.

"What about rent?" Macon asked. He had no money at all, nor any way of making any.

"This is an old family place," the old man said. "Can't charge you rent on something I got just by existing."

Macon didn't yet understand about the furniture they were making, had no clue that it had all sold long before it was finished, most pieces for as much as a used Hyundai.

If anyone in town found the arrangement strange, they only whispered it. More likely, no one noticed. Theirs were shadows cast by walking toward the light. Shadows unseen. But the farm, the workshop, its soft halogen lamps spilling onto the barnyard late into the night, that was their world. A population of two, but when they were out there, working together like some precision crankshaft, it felt so much fuller. It felt like intimacy.

Sunday evenings, the phone would ring, and the old man would dash off to his bedroom like he'd heard the smoke detector. It was the only time he hurried. Macon could hear him talking late into the night, that low rumble, and sometimes he even heard laughter. The next day, the old man didn't say anything, but he seemed lighter, like he'd been out dancing.

Sometimes Macon stood in his doorway and listened. He couldn't make out the words, and didn't want to, but he could hear that rumble. Even the old man had someone beyond the boundaries of the farm. No one called Macon, and probably no one ever would. He didn't have an old family house where he could retreat. It made him wonder—would the old man have kept him on if he hadn't taken to sanding like that?

Macon knew he wasn't supposed to ask about the phone calls. The boundary line around their relationship was as sturdy as a split-rail fence, and that made him curious. It was a real predicament: he had a feeling that the old man wanted to talk about the calls, wanted to talk about so many things, but he didn't know how, not really. And Macon wanted that, too, but it was the first step—how did people take that first step? How did people ever dare fall in love? He understood the idea of *being* in love, intimacy, being devoted to someone more than yourself. That made a good, clean sort of sense, and he'd always thought he'd be good at that. He was loyal. But how did that happen? How did you enter that room? Was there some sort of door that everyone else saw but that was invisible to him?

Something of the phone calls summoned memories of his parents. He thought he remembered them, or maybe he just wanted to. Memory was hard to trust. Probably, they were just memories of old pictures. The rest was invention. His father's deep baritone. The colorful ties he wore: saxophones in a swirl of musical notes, stilt-legged pelicans, old penny-farthing bicycles. His mother's calm smile, no teeth. The way she would squint and pinch her mouth shut when she was concentrating.

They were inventions in which he chose to believe. Or maybe they were genuine. Who could say for sure? It seemed possible: memories passed from one generation to the next, like hair color or gait.

Every time the phone rang, he thought it might be his mother or father. It was the briefest reflex, hope like a lightning strike. You could know something and not all at once.

For Ruth, Sunday evenings were the great exhalation. All week she held her breath without meaning to. Then Sunday came like discovering a new religion. Sundays, when Harold Gutman walked over to the hospital for a few hours. There was nothing improper about her conversations with Gus, but still. It was easier this way.

She strolled Boston as they talked, cell phone pushed to her ear. Beacon Hill, Back Bay, sometimes the North End or Charlestown. She walked and talked and felt like some young dancer. Nimble. Graceful. Youth thrust upon her, briefly. And health. She felt healthy, which she hadn't been for years.

It was lymphoma. She could feel it accumulating. Her variety killed you so slowly that it hardly felt different than old age. That's what Harold Gutman had said. That felt right. She hadn't told Gus, not yet. She couldn't tell him and had to tell him. It was a poison that worked slowly. There was time.

Macon wanted to feel at home in the old farmhouse, and he admired the old man, he really did. He just *knew* everything, and not just about woodworking. Knew why they got an infestation of ladybugs when the neighbors harvested soybeans, or why a carbureted engine smelled different than fuel injection. Sometimes they sat on the front porch and watched scud clouds form on the horizon, and the old man had a knack for predicting which direction they'd go.

Evenings, they would sit together on the back porch. It grew dark slower out in the country. Land so flat, so clean, you could hear the shadows as they encroached.

The old man paged through stacks of *Fine Woodworking*, and Macon read old comics he'd found in the closet. There was a computer in the den, and sometimes Macon watched old cartoons. Sometimes the old man drank a High Life, and he didn't mind if Macon had one too.

But Macon still felt feel like an interloper. It wasn't anything the old man had done, but there was no ignoring the weight of history. Generations of his people had lived on that farm, long enough that the family pictures lining the walls seemed to conjure ancient myths. They all seemed like decent people, modest like the old man, but they weren't Macon's people.

More than a year in the old house, and Macon still held his pee in the middle of the night because of the creaky floors.

Gus cooked breakfasts that covered the kitchen table: sausage, eggs, English muffins, oatmeal, frozen hashbrowns. They ate big in the morning so they wouldn't have to stop working until supper. The kid learned to drink coffee, and to drink it black. As with everything, he didn't complain, like he'd never been taught how.

Gus had hoped that big, slow-moving breakfasts would make the kid feel welcome, might puncture that membrane between them. Something about a big meal was disarming, naturally social. But the kid stayed drawn taut as a clothesline.

He'd never asked the kid to do the dishes or to vacuum. The kid just did those sorts of things instinctively. He wasn't sure how to feel about that. He liked having a clean house, admired the kid's sense of decorum, but he didn't want the kid feeling like a tenant. Beholden. Like the kid was perpetually seeking penance for some awful crime he wouldn't talk about.

One evening Macon answered the phone, something he normally avoided. But the old man was in the shower, and it rang, and there was no escaping it.

It was a woman's voice, and she was expecting the old man. "Oh, well, hello there."

"Yes, ma'am, hello." He paused, unsure of what to say next. "He's just over in the shower right now."

"And you must be Macon." Macon got the impression that the old man had mentioned him to the woman, the apprenticeship, but maybe he hadn't told her everything? For instance, that Macon had been staying there?

"Yes, ma'am. Macon."

She cleared her throat and then coughed sidelong without covering the receiver. "Well, excuse me," she said. "It's lovely to meet you. Hear you, I guess. I'm Ruth."

Macon didn't know what to say to that. He'd never talked much on the telephone. "Yes, ma'am," he said again.

"And how old are you now, Macon?"

"Seventeen. Eighteen in a couple weeks."

"Eighteen. The big one. Do you two have anything special planned?"

"Oh, well, no, ma'am. I guess not. That's a Thursday, and Thursdays we usually do catfish and potatoes."

The woman laughed at that, and it was such a genuine laugh, a high hoot, and she surrendered to it. An enchanting laugh, so easy, and it made him laugh, too, like the laugh needed to escape his body. He couldn't remember the last time he'd laughed.

"Oh, dear, Macon. That's a riot. Catfish for your birthday."

"Yes, ma'am," Macon said. He was still chuckling.

"When was the last time he fed you something green?"

"I guess we had some radishes in June."

"Gus is just a sturdy old goat. I never had any luck reforming him either."

An ex-wife then. But she still adored the old man. Loved him, even now. You could just hear it. Everything about him was still in the present tense for her. That was so like the old man, incapable of making enemies of anyone, even ex-wives.

She fell silent, and Macon got the feeling that she was trying to picture it all. Their daily routines. Ruth had a quiet confidence. She ruled the silence, not in an unkind way, but it still pulled Macon off balance. She was older, wealthy, educated, and Macon was none of those things.

"Well, what would you want?" she asked finally.

"Ma'am?"

"For a birthday present, what would you choose?"

"A go-kart," he said, almost automatically. He hadn't even known he'd been thinking it.

"A go-kart." She laughed again, as if Macon had told a joke. "Most kids your age want a car."

"Yes, ma'am."

That was when the old man emerged from the bathroom. He was shirtless and wiping the backs of his ears with the towel. When he saw Macon standing there, holding the phone, he pulled up.

Macon froze. It felt like he'd been caught shoplifting, though he'd never stolen anything in his life. The old man just stared at him, as if two distinct worlds had just collided, two continent-sized icebergs.

Macon handed the old man the phone without saying goodbye to Ruth and scuttled away.

For a moment, Gus watched the doorway, like he might still see the kid's imprint. He held the phone up to his ear, and before he could speak, Ruth said, "Nice kid," like she could feel his presence on the line.

"He really is."

But then Ruth didn't follow up with more questions, and Gus didn't offer any explanations, and the kid's presence hung over them like rainclouds. They talked

about the Red Sox and the upcoming Presidential election. Ruth talked about going out to the Cape for a couple weeks, and Gus talked about the dining table they were working on. Then they talked about Annabelle, settling into memories like an embrace.

They were just getting ready to hang up when Gus spoke of the kid again.

"You ever worry that you're prejudiced?" he asked.

"Prejudiced? No, not really, I guess. But now I will."

"Sorry. It's just, I don't know. I can't get the kid to open up. He's just so clenched, and I have a feeling it's something I've done or something I'm doing or, I don't know. Something awful I don't even know I'm doing?"

"Prejudiced in what way?"

"He was homeless for a while, I don't know how long. He's an orphan."

"And you're afraid...?"

"I don't know. I think the world has trained him to be invisible. And I don't know how you undo that sort of thing."

"Sure."

"He must feel so alone."

"You've thought about this a lot."

"All the time."

"Oh, Gus," she said.

They lapsed into silence. Not at all uncomfortable. They were both considering. Each listened to the other breathing. They were better at that now, letting the silence just *be*. Silence was a skill that had emerged with age. They could veer in and out of old conversations now. They had memorized each other, like painters who could recall making each brush stroke.

"I'll think on it some more," she said.

"Thanks. Sorry."

"You paying the kid a fair rate?"

"Well, it's more of an apprenticeship, I guess."

"Gus. Jesus Christ."

"It's not that—"

"You're working a young homeless kid sixty hours a week and not paying him? And you're asking me if I think *I* might be prejudiced?"

"OK."

"And you wonder why he's timid? Jesus, Gus. Pay the kid."

Gus hadn't meant to be stingy. It just hadn't occurred to him, not even when it was clear the kid had no money. He used to wonder after Ruth's ancestral wealth. Mayflower money, they called it in New England. Money just wasn't something she'd ever thought about. Gus had grown up poor, his people had been poor for

two-hundred years, but now he had plenty of money, so much that he wasn't even sure how much he had. But he didn't want much of anything, and so he never thought about it either.

They drove to New York to deliver work. The old man rented a box truck, and they filled it up quickly, desks and dining tables and a heap of chairs. A season's worth of work. Macon stood at the back and just stared at the haul, mesmerized.

"It's like everything, the lines, they're so tidy, it's almost like camouflage," he said.

"Our job is to make furniture that you hardly notice."

That sounded right to Macon, too. Furniture that left something unsaid.

They drove in silence for the first couple hours. Macon stared out the window as they crossed Pennsylvania, and he wondered when hills became mountains. Who decided? Those low-slung valleys with ambling streams. They summited the peaks, the lumbering box truck grunting under its own weight. His ears felt like they had wool in them, and he could only clear it away by swallowing. When they got closer to the city, the skyline rose in the distance like mountains, and Macon didn't even realize he was leaning forward until his neck started to ache.

"Something else, isn't it?" the old man said.

They unloaded the truck at a store in the East Village. Macon was careful to be the one walking backwards down the ramp, to set his end down last. A salesman stood off to the side and watched them. He had the upright posture of a sapling and wore a suit that cleaved to his body.

"Macon made half of this haul," the old man said.

The salesman smiled awkwardly. "It's a pleasure, young man," he said. He turned back to the old man and handed him an envelope, and they shook hands. Then he and Gus were off, back onto the street which thrummed like an anthill.

"Should we grab a hotel for the night? Go get a nice steak dinner?"

"Maybe we could," Macon said. "Or maybe they could just head home?"

The old man smiled and nodded, and they heaved themselves up into the truck.

When they'd finally escaped the city, the old man handed Macon the envelope.

"Sir?"

"Back pay," he said.

Macon pulled the flap back and peered inside. The check was made out to the old man in the amount of $87,000.

"That's only the front half," the old man said. "Every vendor is a little different. But you'll get the back half when we make the next delivery."

"Sir," Macon said, but then he didn't know what else to say. He hadn't much thought about money until this trip. Felt like the old man was already giving him

something sturdier than money. He checked the envelope again and looked at the old man and then looked back out the window like it might offer some refuge.

The go-karts arrived later that week. One was red, and the other was blue. Both had high roll-cages and good-sized Briggs & Stratton motors.

The old man looked over at Macon and then back at the go-karts.

"I might have said something about a go-kart," Macon admitted. "For my birthday. I didn't mean anything by it. I thought, I don't know, I thought we were just talking."

"To Ruth," the old man said, realizing. He turned toward Macon and grinned like a toddler.

They drove the go-karts all morning, drove until they'd worn an oblong path through the barnyard. It was the first time they hadn't spent the morning out in the shop, and neither of them seemed to notice. The old man was the better driver, but Macon was more aggressive, almost reckless—that fun sort of reckless you could be with a go-kart. He learned how to drift around the corners, gliding but still under control. There was a depression in the middle of the yard, maybe from an old tree that had gone down, and if Macon timed it just right, he could ramp it. Race after race, they circled the barnyard, their backs going sweaty against the seats. The old man yelled at Macon as he cornered and tried to pass him on the inside, and Macon just grinned back at him.

The old man put Ruth's phone number on the fridge. He didn't say anything else, but Macon understood. He loved the way the old man did that, said things without saying them. Macon wanted to be like that someday.

Macon sat in his bedroom and dialed the number. The old house groaned like it always did at night. All that chatter had unnerved him at first, but it was just the humidity. That's what the old man had told him, anyway. Everything about the house was wood. Took on moisture like a sponge. Two or three gallons of water coming and going with the humidity, joints expanding and contracting. Like the old house was alive, and it was talking.

When Ruth came on the line, Macon thanked her before even saying hello.

"Oh, goodness, Macon. Of course. I'm so glad you like them. I thought you could use them more now, before winter comes."

"Yes, ma'am. We drove them all morning."

"Gus, too?"

"He was like a race driver, ma'am."

"His knees must have been up to his ears."

"Yes, ma'am. Like a clown. You should have seen it."

She hesitated, and Macon felt the weight of history, like he'd stumbled onto an old battlefield. "Oh, Macon. I'd love to see it," she said.

"Oh, yes, ma'am, you should. You really should. You could come for my birthday."

Ruth went quiet on the other end of the line. It was only a few moments, but it felt much longer. Maybe it was age, or maybe it was the class divide. High born and low born, New England and Midwest. There was nothing unkind about her lapses into silence. In fact, there was a comfort to them, a chance for them to sort out their thoughts. He liked talking to Ruth. She seemed to know what he meant even when it wasn't exactly what he'd said.

Before she spoke again, she drew in a deep breath. Sharp. She'd been crying. He'd somehow caused it. But she steeled herself. "Macon," she said, "I'd love to come for your birthday."

And that was it, like a contract they'd both signed.

"We'd love that," he said. "We both would, I know it."

"Catfish and potatoes."

"Yes, ma'am. And some radishes."

Memory of this moment would hum through Macon for the rest of his life, swelling and elongating through time. Sometimes it was dread that overcame him, the feeling that he'd inserted himself into some generational tension he wasn't old enough to understand. Other times he was convinced that it was only Ruth's sense of decorum that had made her agree. To decline his invitation would have been tantamount to admitting that he was a mere tenant. No, she *had* to come.

It wasn't until years later, when the old man lay dying in hospice, that the old man thanked Macon. Reached out for him. Tremors ran through his hands. Their fingertips touched. *You were the child*, he said, *who appears in the doorway when his parents are fighting*.

They opened the kid a bank account. Gus slid the check over to the bank manager and she said, "Two names on the account, then," and Gus said, "No, no. Only the young man."

The kid kept his ATM card and cash in his pocket because he didn't have a wallet. For the next month, Gus would catch him logging onto the bank website and staring at the balance as if he were marveling at a new winter coat.

That weekend the kid walked into town. Said he might buy some Red Wing boots. He was gone a couple of hours, and Gus paced the barnyard like an old dog waiting on its owner. When the kid finally appeared in the distance, he was carrying a little plastic bag, too small for boots. Afternoon had eased into evening. Long shadows from the telephone poles stretched down the gravel lane.

"Do you know how much Red Wing boots cost?" he said.

Gus smiled, but he understood. There was shame in poverty, but there was shame in escaping it, too.

"I need to tell you something," the kid said. He looked at Gus and then away. He handed Gus the bag but still wouldn't meet his eyes. "I think I messed up."

Gus stared at the kid and then opened the bag. Inside was a new doorknob for the workshop.

Ruth booked her flight and rental car as if in a fever dream. She packed her suitcase a week in advance and then stared at it every time she walked into the bedroom.

"A birthday party?" Harold Gutman asked.

"A birthday," she said. "Not really a party."

"For a kid you've never met."

It was too hard to explain, and she didn't really want to anyway.

"Where will you stay?"

She stared at him. Tension vibrated off his body, but Ruth hardly cared. She'd spent most of her life behaving, doing what needed done. Her ancestors were Puritans. She could see their scowling faces.

"I'll be home on Saturday," she said. "Maybe Sunday."

He glared at her suitcase like it was the real culprit. He was talking, his voice rising and falling in anger, but Ruth didn't hear his words. She'd slipped off into memory. The memory of Gus, the last time she'd seen him. Ten years ago now, though the reunion still murmured through her body, advancing and retreating like the tides. Nothing so present as the past. They'd sat together at a little café in the Back Bay and drunk tea and tried to talk as if they had carried on without each other, but they both knew better. Gus wasn't angry or resentful as some men might have been. He was just sad. Mostly she talked and he listened like he always had. Quiet as an oak tree, all his energy reserved for listening.

They'd sat there for, what, two, three hours? When they'd finally willed themselves to leave, he stared at his boots and said goodbye, and she tugged at his forearm, and they embraced. She held onto him as if gripping a cliff face, and he let her. He let her. And then he was gone. She watched him amble away, meandering through the bustle of Newbury Street, hands clasped behind his back as if to make his body narrower.

She turned and gone back to their table. She sat and collected herself. Cups of tea long gone cold. There was a coaster picturing a little sea horse with angular shadows, just a cardboard thing. Disposable. But she pocketed it. It sat on her nightstand now, the fibers of the carboard pulling loose.

On the morning of Macon's birthday, the old man seemed off. Moody, like a dog sensing a storm. Forgot to even say happy birthday until mid-morning.

The old man didn't reprimand him for inviting Ruth, which almost made it worse. In fact, he didn't say much of anything. Went quiet as an owl. Just held the doorknob in both hands and stared down at it like it was the most precious thing he'd ever owned. Like he was holding the eucharist.

Macon hid in his bedroom that night. He hadn't been so mortified for years. Not since that foster home, the third one, where the woman had caught him hiding chicken nuggets in his pocket. She hadn't been angry, not exactly, but she just hadn't understood. Once you'd felt real hunger, it never left you. You never trusted tomorrow again.

Ruth was set to arrive at four-thirty, but the old man moved out to the front porch at three. Macon could sense the tension. He felt for the old man, but there was also envy. Who had ever fretted about his own arrival or noticed his absence?

But the old man. God—he was just besieged. It pained Macon to see. There was an intensity to his existence right then, pain and joy in equal measure. He watched the old man from the window, and eventually he joined him on the porch.

For a while, they sat quietly. They rocked back and forth in their chairs and stared down the long lane as if it were a telescope. The old man sat flat-footed, hands on his thighs, but his breathing was too fast. A vein in his temple pulsed.

"When my folks died," Macon said and then stopped as if repositioning his grip. He realized he'd been telling the old man this story for a long time in his head, but he'd never spoken the words aloud. "They died years back. I was a baby."

The old man was staring at him fixedly.

"Bad car accident." Normally, this was when Macon would offer a few sparse details followed by his appraisal that he'd been lucky, all things considered. He was a baby, couldn't remember it.

"Tell me about them," the old man said.

No one had ever asked that. Other people had always seemed eager to push past this part, maybe for Macon's sake, but probably for their own.

"My father wore these colorful ties. Purple and green mixed together. Pictures of trumpets and kangaroos on them." The old man leaned back and smiled. "My mother, I guess she had the smartest voice you've ever heard. Like somebody on *Jeopardy*! She studied insects. She was working at Oberlin, which is how we ended up here. Up north like a Yankee.

The old man smiled again. He knew what Macon was doing, but he let the enchantment spread over him anyway.

"Insects," the old man said, like he was holding the word in his hands and inspecting it.

"That's all secondhand," Macon said. "I was too little. But I have some pictures."

"Yeah."

"Now here I am," he said.

The old man was studying him again. Sad eyes. It wasn't pity. There was more to it than that. The old man knew plenty about that sort of thing. How people cast longer shadows in death than they had in life. How this was something you couldn't understand until it happened to you. And now their griefs had intersected, and did that soothe the pain or amplify it? That was a tougher business. But there was some goodness, maybe, in two people grieving next to each another.

"I used to work twenty, thirty hours straight," the old man said. "Back when I was younger and sorting through things. Death. But I found that no matter how tired you are, there's always enough energy left for the pain."

He'd been staring off, but now he turned toward Macon. "Why is that?"

Macon didn't answer, and the old man didn't want him to. What he'd said—it felt true as gravity, and just as inexplicable. He was an old man, but he was also a little boy, asking why things died, which might be the only question worth asking.

When the car finally appeared at the end of the lane, the old man stood and re-tucked his shirt, and Macon went inside. Reunions were inelegant things. They didn't need an audience.

Ruth was smaller than he remembered. She walked with a slight limp, bad hips, but if there was pain, she ignored it. She had an easy elegance, as if she'd never much thought of it. She seemed like the kind of woman who was used to hard winters. When she hugged Macon, she sighed. It felt like they'd known each other for years.

They spent the afternoon wandering around the farm, through the barn, through the workshop. Macon talked about their latest projects. Ruth gazed around as if at a museum, and Macon understood that she'd wandered back in time. She traced her hands across half-sanded tabletops. She held a bench plane under the light and studied it like a jeweler. Beautiful lines, lithe lines. Macon said it was his favorite, a Stanley-Bailey #4.

Ruth watched Macon as he talked. Whatever clench had once existed in him had loosened. This was his home, Gus was his father. They told stories jointly. One would start, and the other would finish. They had melded together, held memories mutually like an old married couple. They were everything together that she had hoped and feared.

After dinner, they lingered in the kitchen, drinking coffee. Macon put the glasses away while the old man scrubbed the fish smell out of the broiler pan. As he worked Macon stole glances of Ruth, the way her eyes traveled the house.

"Thirty years," she said. "But you're still using the same tea towels."

The old man stopped scrubbing. "Did you know we have tea towels, Macon?"

Macon imagined the old man and Ruth when they were younger. They would have been the kind of parents who slow-danced in front of their kids.

Gus and Ruth took turns racing Macon around the barnyard. A rough, dirt track worn in the grass, oblong and winding. Macon won every race and never grew tired of winning. Eventually, Ruth and Gus begged off. Too tired, they said. Too old. But Macon kept driving on his own, carving tracks in the barnyard through the dimness of dusk.

Ruth and Gus moved to the back porch. Gus had a beer, and Ruth sipped on a gin. They watched Macon and didn't even feel their faces curl into smiles as he drove past and waved.

Gus looked upward. Clouds twisted together like dancers.

"Do you ever feel," he asked, "like your life is really just preparation for another life that you'll never quite have?"

She didn't respond straight away, and he didn't expect her to. Eventually, she said, "You don't have to stay unhappy forever."

He seemed to think about this prospect as if for the first time. The last of the shadows leaned from the barnyard to the back porch, stretching like pulled taffy. Macon kept circling and waving, lap after lap.

"I mean it, Gus. You don't have to stay unhappy."

He stared out at the field of corn. He squinted at something that wasn't there. "Well, I guess I've come this far."

Later, Macon came and sat next to them. He was breathing hard, disturbing their calm. He could feel it. The old man poured him a glass of water, and he drank it down without tasting it. The adrenaline had taken hold of him, and he couldn't sit still. Ruth and the old man weren't talking, but they had been. You could feel the echoes of their words. It was like that hollow in the barnyard from an old tree. There and not there. He didn't want to interrupt anything, so wandered out toward the workshop.

Ruth and Gus sat and listened and spoke intermittently. Dusk's silent advance. Gusts of wind rustling the corn.

"I think he holds his pee in the middle of the night."

"Your father would have liked him."

They sat with that thought for a while.

"You need to start introducing him to your vendors. It'll make it easier when he takes over."

"That's true."

"He'll want it?"

Gus tried to picture the kid with gray hair, a labored bearing. "The problem is that I want more for him. More than this."

"I'm not sure you realize how much this is."

A metallic grating sound came from the workshop. Gus leaned forward as if he might see it through the darkness. Macon. He was putting on the new doorknob.

"When I'm gone," he said, "I'll know I could have done better. Could have done more with my life. More good, I mean. Could have added more to the world."

"Gus."

He shrugged. Resigned, if not at peace. His life hadn't gone the way he'd hoped. He'd never quite become the man he'd wanted to be. It was such an ordinary regret. He'd come closest back when he was a father. The man he was and the man he wanted to be, they'd nearly aligned then. Nearly eclipsed each other. If only he'd had a bit more time.

"But the kid." He gestured vaguely toward the workshop. "He's pure as dew. He's just..." His voice failed him.

"That's because of you partly. That kindness."

He shook his head. "This isn't kindness. You can't call it that. It's just basic courtesy. No one else ever bothered, but that doesn't make it kindness. Sharing water with a stranger in the desert. It's hardly anything at all, really."

"It's something, Gus."

"And look at him. Over there, changing out that doorknob."

They both looked toward the workshop. They couldn't see Macon out there in the shadows, but they could hear him working. He was humming to himself.

"Do you remember when she fell from that door and skinned her elbow?" Ruth asked, and Gus was already nodding. He remembered, of course he did.

Annabelle had been swinging on the door, back and forth. She was waiting for Gus to finish work for the day. Begging him to come and play. And Gus had said "Soon, soon," though he hadn't really meant it. A father's refrain. She'd started swinging on the door, like a carnival ride, and Gus yelled at her to stop it, she was going to hurt herself, but she ignored him. Or maybe she didn't hear. She was laughing like a little sprite. But then the doorknob pulled clean off and she tumbled to the ground and cried, and Gus couldn't remember what happened after that.

"You never fixed it," Ruth said but Gus didn't answer. He was afraid of disrupting the spell she had cast.

Then she was looking right at him, her face next to his. "Do you ever feel like a father again?"

Gus couldn't hold the tears this time. They came for him, and he let them. She let him cry, didn't try to fix him. She turned back toward the kid, kept trying to see him through the shadows. Finally, she stood and walked across the barnyard until she disappeared, too. He could hear them talking but couldn't untangle the words.

A few minutes later, she emerged from the shadows as a ship through fog. She looked at him, not unkindly, never unkindly, but she wanted an answer, she wanted to torture herself, which Gus did understand.

"Yes," he said. "Sometimes." If felt like an admission of guilt before a judge.

"Gus?" she said.

"Hmm?"

"Look at me, dear."

He did. She was staring into him. He felt her eyes like a second sun.

"You're allowed to love him," she said.

It felt so quiet, just the breeze and the kid out there humming some tune. He'd led such a lonely life. But it had never felt quiet, not like this. There was always memory, and memory was loud. The past was always trying to overwhelm the present.

Ruth leaned her head on his shoulder. He held his body rigid as a totem. He hadn't been so terrified in years. They sat like that and stared out at the workshop.

"Not everything has to be grief," she said.

"That's a thought."

"You don't think so?"

The kid was out there, humming louder now as he worked. Gus couldn't place the tune, but it didn't matter. Ruth adjusted her head, seeking out that soft tissue in the well of his shoulder. She breathed in and out rhythmically.

"I never found the thing that comes after grief," he said.

They sat for a few moments, and then she said, "I don't know about that."

They went quiet again. Night had come on like a sigh. They couldn't see Macon, but they watched the space where he was. It felt like they were sitting inside of a silence they'd made themselves. High green corn on all sides like a palisade. Who would have ever noticed them, and who would have cared? A farm that looked like farms do. A bleak, forgettable place. Three quiet people, not even related. People ordinary as dandelions. Who would have even paused to stare?

Gus would have stayed there forever, the three of them. Motionless, but not. Together but not, as every family is. But they were the rare family that understood this.

Gus closed his eyes. Ruth breathed evenly onto his neck. The kid sneezed and said "Pardon me" to no one. It seemed like he was closer than he really was. Within arm's reach. Gus felt Ruth, too, that beguiling radiation of another human being. They didn't talk, but it felt like they did. There was no music, but it felt like there was. There was the sea of corn trembling under the breeze. And there was the kid, across the barnyard, putting a new doorknob on the workshop door. He was humming. It felt like the world had just taken a breath. It felt like they were dancing. ♀